FAITH AND DOUBT
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Psalm 122
Mark 9:14–29

"I believe; help my unbelief."
Mark 9:24 (NRSV)

If there is one thing that we have all been taught to fear, it is surely questions.
There are some things, we learn early, that are never to be challenged. They simply are. They are absolute. They come out of a fountain of eternal truth.
And they are true because someone else said they are true. So we live with someone
else's truth for a long time. Until the answers run dry. I know that because I myself
have been caught in a desert of doubt and found the answers to be worse than
the questions ever could be. . . . I began to trust the questions themselves to lead me
beyond my understanding, to faith. I began to use my questions themselves to chart
my way through the dark waters.

Joan D. Chittister, OSP
Called to Questions: A Spiritual Memoir

Someone once said that the way really to understand a Bible story is to put yourself into it. Write yourself into the narrative, because ultimately that's what Bible stories are about—you, me.

I don't have any trouble at all putting myself into this one. I know this man. I understand him. I could be him, easily.

Madeline L'Engle is a distinguished author, poet, mother, and grandmother. She has written and said a lot of wise and helpful things, none more true than this: "To be a parent is to only be as happy as your least happy child." Everybody can understand that. When your child is unhappy, you are unhappy. When your child hurts, you hurt. When your child is in trouble,

you experience it deeply. Everybody can understand this father who brings his son to Jesus one day.

This story has even more meaning to me this time around. A little more than two years ago, a six-week-old granddaughter was in Children's Memorial Hospital, where her mother and father brought her, not unlike the father in the story. They brought her to Children's because that's the only place you can bring a baby who has a hole in her heart and needs an operation. On the day of her surgery and for days, which became weeks, afterward, her parents, her grandparents, her aunts and uncles came to a new understanding of the limits of our influence and ability to protect our dear ones. After open heart surgery, a baby is pretty much paralyzed by anesthesia in order to allow healing to happen. For days, all you can do is stand by and watch the machines and tubes and wires and monitors keeping her alive. All you can do is in some way trust that the physicians and nurses know what they are doing and, of course, pray, which I suspect anyone who has ever been in that situation does a lot of, whether they have much faith, a little faith, or no faith. You pray because that is about all you can do.

She recovered, thanks be to God. She is as healthy and lively as a two-year-old should be. And she is here today to see her baby sister baptized, a lovely convergence of text and personal experience that I simply could not ignore.

One day a desperate father brought his son to Jesus. From what Mark says about the boy, we would conclude that his condition is epilepsy, a condition that in the ancient world was terrifying with its unpredictable and violent symptoms. It was generally believed that the person was demon possessed. Physicians can treat and manage it today, but in that world it must have been heartbreaking. He was probably a handsome, happy, carefree little boy who did all things little boys do: ran everywhere, never walked; played with his friends; got dirty—if there was mud anywhere, found it, played in it; had trouble paying attention very long to anything; and asked questions nonstop. But then, without warning, his face contorts, his eyes roll back, he almost seems to stop breathing, becomes rigid. He falls down, grinds his teeth, and foams at the mouth. His friends run away. Even adults are frightened. Only his parents kneel down and hold him tightly until the seizure subsides. That is how I see this father: on his knees, holding his little boy in his arms, and then when the seizure ends, stroking his face, his hair, wiping his mouth, speaking gently and reassuringly to him. And inside, he knows his powerlessness, his helplessness. His heart is broken and he's afraid.

My guess is that this man, these parents, have tried everything, have taken him to physicians, healers, have purchased medicines, tried special diets. And so when they hear that a healer and teacher from Nazareth, Jesus by

name, is in the vicinity, they bring their son to him. My guess is that it is not easy for them to do it: they have been disappointed so many times before.

But the man does it. Gathers up his son and walks miles to the place they heard Jesus was.

“Teacher, I brought you my son. He has a spirit that makes him unable to speak, and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid, and I asked your disciples to heal him, but they could not do so.”

And as he’s speaking, it happens. The boy becomes rigid, falls down on the ground in front of Jesus and all of them. The man kneels and holds his son and it is then, I think, that he says,
“If you are able to do anything, have pity and help us.” Notice that the man is not at all sure about this, not at all sure that Jesus can help. “If you are able.” There’s uncertainty and doubt in that “if.”

Jesus responds, “Anything is possible for the one who believes.”

So the man says what he has to say to get some help for his son: “I believe.” And then he adds an amazing request, a confession, an honest statement if there ever was one: “Help my unbelief.”

“I believe; help my unbelief.”

That is an important story. I suspect all, or at least most of us, understand that father’s confession: “I believe; help my unbelief.” I suspect most of us live somewhere in the space between belief and unbelief. That may be the most relevant verse in the Bible for modern men and women.

The man doesn’t seem to bring a lot of faith to Jesus. In fact, he’s not sure what he believes, not sure he believes at all. There are some days when he does; other days he doesn’t. So he doesn’t have religious credentials. What he brings to Jesus is the deepest, most profound thing in his life: his love and concern for his son. What he brings to Jesus is his own deep need, his theological honesty. What he does is act in spite of his own uncertainty, and it is enough. Jesus heals the little boy.

Now you can go in one of two directions at this point. You can focus on the healing, the miracle. You can wonder about miracles—whether they happen and how they happen. You can ask the big question about why some people pray for a miracle and get it while others pray and healing doesn’t happen. You can stand by the crib of a two-year-old, attached to all those machines and blinking monitors, not moving except for the rhythmic rising and falling of her tiny chest responding to the ventilator. And then watch, astonished,

as the miracle of healing begins to happen, watch amazed as she begins to move, squirm, open her eyes and look around, and then breathe on her own and finally make a lovely sound. And my guess is that the most confirmed unbeliever in the world would find himself or herself mumbling "Thank you, thank you" and at least consider using this word *miracle* to describe what has transpired.

And you can be in the room when the doctor comes in, sits down, and delivers the bad news, the worst news, the news you have been afraid of, and witness the power and miracle of love—the love of family and friends, and parents and children; the power of the holy love behind all human love and in some way the source of all human love—and witness the truth that love is more powerful than death and that nothing that ever happens to us can separate us from God's love. And either way it is a miracle.

But I really believe the man, the father with his mixture of belief and unbelief, is the point here. Douglas John Hall, in his recent book, *Bound and Free*, looks back over his career teaching religion on university faculties for the past fifty years and observes that, to a large extent, religious faith has come to mean intellectual certainty. Christian faith, therefore, becomes a list of ideas about God and Jesus that a faithful person fully understands with no doubt at all, accepts and adopts as one's own. Hall thinks that this definition of faith as certainty is not only wrong but actually functions as a deterrent to faith for many people.

The problem is that if faith is certainty, there is no room in it for doubt. If faith means certainty, then doubt is the opposite of faith. And at that point a lot of people start leaving the church and religion in general, honest people who find themselves doubting and questioning.

There is another way of thinking about this. There is a way of seeing doubt and questioning as a healthy part of faith, not at all its opposite.

The Spanish philosopher Unamuno said, "Faith without doubt is dead."

We certainly understand that scientifically. The history of science is the story of people brave enough to doubt conventional thought. Nobel Prize physicist Richard Feynman said, "If you know that you are not sure, you have a chance to improve the situation." If a brave cardiac surgeon and assistant had not doubted conventional wisdom about how to treat a serious heart defect fifty years ago, my granddaughter would not have had her surgery.

Absolute certainty and the absence of doubt can make religion into a narrow, divisive, and sometimes dangerous ideology. In her fine book *The Battle for God*, Karen Armstrong observes, "There is a problem today in

most religions, as well as many nonreligious ideologies. I will call this the problem of certitude."

Certitude, absolute certainty, easily becomes a fundamentalism that has no room for doubt, questions, or even much intellectual diversity. The people who planned and carried out the attacks of 9/11 were inspired by absolute certainty with respect to their cause (Hall). So are suicide bombers in Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Pakistan.

No religion has a monopoly on fundamentalist certainty. But in a time of chaos and uncertainty, fundamentalism of all kinds is enormously attractive. Professor Hall says that fundamentalist certainty provides the security and embrace of a system of meaning that will uphold us in our self doubt (p. 100).

In a speech he delivered at a Baptist Seminary, poet and author Wendell Berry said that while many Christians are exceedingly confident about God and what God likes and doesn't like, he does not share that confidence.

That speech is in a volume of essays Berry has titled, interestingly, *The Way of Ignorance*. What we most need, he thinks, theologically, religiously, politically, is a little less certainty, a lot more healthy doubting and skepticism.

The man who loved his son so much that he brought him to Jesus and who was courageous and honest enough to express his uncertainty and doubt gives us a new definition of faith. Faith and doubt are not opposite. They live side by side in most of us. Our doubts keep our faith from becoming arrogant fundamentalism. And our faith keeps our doubt from becoming gloomy cynicism. Absolute certainty politically becomes an arrogant ideology that will tolerate no doubt, no diversity of thought, no criticism, and always becomes a disaster. They belong together, faith and doubt do—in science certainly, in politics, and in religion.

Faith, Professor Hall says, is trusting God in spite of our doubts. Faith is the act, the action, the getting up and moving. Faith, for the father in the story, is coming to a place of healing in spite of his uncertainty. Faith is taking the first step—back to church, to attend the AA meeting, to reach out in forgiveness in spite of your uncertainty or pride or anger. It is taking a risk, betting on the mercy and love and healing power of God even while not at all intellectually certain of it.

It is true that people leave church or stay away from church because they have been convinced that having a faith means agreeing to a certain set of beliefs. And because they have some questions or can't always, all the time, affirm all of it, in fact have some doubts, they conclude that they don't

belong. If that in any way describes you and the state of your soul, please hear this story again, the story of the man who brings both his belief and unbelief to Jesus.

And if you are on the outside because you can't in good conscience agree to everything, please understand that Jesus didn't ask his followers to agree on anything. He invited people to walk with him and to follow. There was no test, no doctrinal examination required.

And if you are in but find yourself wondering whether you should be because of your doubt, hear the story of a father whose unbelief was, in no way, a barrier to healing.

Nearing the end of his teaching career, Douglas John Hall wrote, "Even Jesus had moments of doubt, in the garden" where he asked God to deliver him from the suffering he was facing, and later on the cross when he cried out that most human of all cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" There is nothing more important, Professor Hall concludes "than that pastors and teachers [and all of us] should take every opportunity to assure those in and around the churches and to hear again that doubt and doubters are welcome in the community of faith" (p. 118).

Presbyterians don't sing the old hymn much because it is identified with evangelistic crusades and tent meetings and altar calls, and all of that makes us very uncomfortable. But I still love it because of what it says about that wonderful father bringing his son to Jesus— about you and me as we live with our belief and unbelief, our faith and our doubt:

> Just as I am, though tossed about
> With many a conflict, many a doubt
> Fightings and fears within, without,
> O Lamb of God, I come, I come!
> (from the hymn "Just as I Am, Without One Plea")

Amen.